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SUBJECT: Swiss October 21 Elections Set to Mark Only Measured
Shifts in the Political Landscape Despite Vitriolic Campaign

REF: (A) BERN 896, (B) BERN 1009

Summary

1. (SBU) The upcoming Swiss national parliamentary elections on October 21 look set to mark measured shifts of political support from the center to the two extremes, with power still shared by all of the current major political parties. The central questions to be answered by this election are (1) the future trajectory of the leading SVP, (2) how far the Greens will bleed votes from the SP, and (3) what losses the mid-spectrum FDP and CVP will sustain. A masterfully orchestrated campaign looks to bode well for continuing SVP strength at near 27% of the vote, while a flagging sense of relevancy may further sap the number two SP (down to about 22%) in favor of the ascendant Swiss Green Party with at least 10%. The mid-spectrum FDP and CVP look set to lose only a small amount of their approximately 15% shares of the vote, depending on political inertia to protect them, even in the face of lackluster leadership for the FDP. Thus the "magic formula" for Swiss concordance democracy does not appear to be at risk in this election, even though the campaign has been the most vitriolic and controversial in memory. What is new is the "personality politics", i.e., the concentration of campaigning on certain individuals rather than parties, with the SVP's Blocher occupying the headlines. End summary.

SVP: Is The Trajectory Ever Upward?

2. (SBU) The first question to be answered by this election is the future trajectory of the SVP (Swiss People's Party). Under the leadership of current Justice Minister Christoph Blocher, the right wing SVP has propelled itself over the past two decades into a leadership position in Switzerland, with the latest polls predicting it taking a historic high of about 27% of the vote - though just slightly higher than its previous national election result of 26.7%. The question now is how much more they can expect to attract voters away from the other major national parties.

3. (SBU) The SVP has set the agenda for this election with its theme of protecting Switzerland against what the SVP sees as unwanted, unlawful foreigners. Their ubiquitous posters depicting three white sheep kicking a black sheep off the Swiss flag have won them less than flattering international media coverage and general scorn from left-wing and pro-immigrant groups inside of Switzerland. But this campaign strategy has allowed them to consolidate their base. What's more, the SVP has used the Rohrschacher affair (involving alleged wrongful dismissal of the Federal Prosecutor by Blocher - see Ref A) and the recent clashes between pro- and anti-SVP demonstrators in Bern just last weekend (See Ref B) to cast itself as a victim of ungrounded accusations by a left-wing conspiracy that

it has been warning the Swiss electorate about.

¶4. (SBU) In a recent meeting with a young Zurich SVP candidate Natalie Rickli, it was clear that the party is confident about its chances and unrepentant about the black sheep political posters. Rickli stated that campaign financing was not a problem for the SVP, and she felt that many Swiss young people are turning to the SVP rather than to other political parties because of the strong image it projects. The SVP has consistently attracted the highest share among young and (not so young) first-time voters.

¶5. (SBU) Most political commentators feel that the SVP has already taken about as many votes away from the centrist parties as it can hope for at this moment. But some say that as the Swiss population ages and naturally becomes more conservative, the SVP's bread-and-butter issues of security and protecting the Swiss way of life are bound to be more and more attractive.

Bleeding from the SP to the Greens

¶6. (SBU) A second question is how Swiss voters will act on the left end of the political spectrum, and specifically how many votes the second largest party, the SP (Socialist Party), will lose to the ascendant Swiss Green Party. The standard SP issues of a strong social safety net and openness to the EU have had less and less resonance with Swiss voters in recent years. Meanwhile, a strong and growing environmental consciousness is luring many former SP supporters to the Greens.

¶7. (SBU) One Green candidate for the national parliament from Neuchatel, Ms. Doris Angst, estimated that her party would attract at least 10% of the vote, and this is in spite of minimal campaign

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financing that permits only limited advertising and puts the emphasis on personal contact with local voters. This is in line with the most recent polls, which give the Greens about 11%

¶8. (SBU) However, the growth potential of the Greens is limited. As a fringe party, they can only realistically hope to win seats in the larger cantons, where a smaller share of the vote is sufficient to win a seat, and in these areas the Greens already have established themselves as a political force. Even surpassing 10% of the vote (7.4% in 2003) would add no more than 2-3 seats to its current 13. What's more, the extreme-left Green party faces competition on environmental issues from the Green conservative party, which is emerging as a political force to be reckoned with. Only on environmental issues do the Green sister-parties see eye-to-eye.

FDP and CVP: Jockeying for the Middle

¶9. (SBU) The final question is how the parties in the middle of the political spectrum, the FDP (Free Democratic Party) and CVP (Christian People's Party), will fare. Over the past year, both parties have been hovering at around 15% of the vote, but over the past two decades have consistently been losing ground to the political extremes, namely the SVP and SP. The CVP now has a charismatic Federal Counselor in Ms. Doris Leuthard, and the most recent polls show the CVP surpassing its old-time rival the FDP by a small margin.

¶10. (SBU) Taken together, these two parties still constitute a stabilizing force in Swiss politics and act as defenders of middle class values. While there is occasional discussion in the Swiss media of the possibility of a merger of the two mid-spectrum parties, no one expects this to happen in the near future. One FDP candidate that we met with recently, Ms. Eva Desarzens, emphasized the deep-seated stability of the Swiss political system and the enormous advantage of incumbency. Sitting officials are almost never turned out by the voters, leaving candidates to fight over seats that come open due to retirement or other reasons. Thus,

Desarzens saw the FDP and CVP as staying at approximately their previous levels in this election.

¶11. (SBU) As for the relative balance between the FDP and CVP, some political commentators have suggested that there may be implications for the number of Federal Counselors that each have if the CVP surges significantly. Presently the FDP has two (Couchepin and Merz) and the CVP only one (Leuthard) after losing one in the last election to the SVP. Since Couchepin is set to take his turn as Swiss President in 2008, some commentators suggest that Merz's position might be at risk. Most agree, however, that barring catastrophic losses by the FDP, Swiss political inertia will prevail.

Comment: Small Shift in Swiss Sentiments, Not System

¶12. (SBU) Thus the "magic formula" for Swiss concordance democracy does not appear to be at risk in this election, even though the campaign has been the most vitriolic and controversial in memory. What is new is the concentration of campaigning on certain individuals rather than parties, with Blocher occupying the headlines, even if he is one of the least beloved of all the Federal Counselors, as opinion polls suggest. The gradual shift away from the political middle over the past years has been one of degrees rather than huge increments, and the basic middle class interests represented by the FDP and CVP are still the largest single political force, making it possible for them to continue acting as a social and political stabilizer, if only in their role as a spoiler in the face of unwanted extreme initiatives by either end of the political spectrum. End comment.

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